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ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory, particularly his voice-oriented term, "heteroglossia," can easily be brought to bear on the teaching of voice in the composition classroom. Bakhtin not only likes the concept of voice, but at times even seems obsessed with it. The notion of heteroglossia suggests a diversity of discourses or voices, and denies the structural or reified version of language. An examination of a paper written by a college freshman demonstrates not only the typical "English paper voice" but also dramatic shifts in voice which reflect culturally encoded communications. In particular, at paragraph 5, the voice completely shifts to a more idiomatic and colloquial stance toward the audience. In short, this paper asks the reader to pose a number of questions concerning the teaching of voice in the composition classroom. Writing instructors must consider whether they want papers emerging strictly from a single voice, or if such manifestations of "heteroglossia" are to be discussed, allowed in student work, and/or valued. (A copy of one student essay is attached.) (HB)

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LITERARY THEORY AND COMPOSITION PRACTICE

Joan Navarre

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Literary Theory and Composition Practice

The objective of this paper is to bring M.M. Bakhtin's literary theory and practice to bear on the teaching of "voice" in composition classrooms. I focus strictly on one of Bakhtin's voice-oriented terms, "heteroglossia." First, I translate this neologism. Then I turn to one student text and I highlight specific examples of how heteroglossia functions. In short, my objective here is twofold: I want to treat heteroglossia as a purveyor of "other ways of talking" about voice; I want to suggest that heteroglossia is a discourse-oriented notion that is not only conceptually, but also pedagogically, useful.

Before I translate "heteroglossia", let me explain why I believe that Bakhtin should be invited into discussions concerning "Voice." Quite simply, Bakhtin likes voices. One might even say he is obsessed with voices. For example, a brief survey of some of his terminology reveals discourse that is voice-oriented. Again, and again, we encounter such voice-oriented words as "univocality," "polyvocality," "internally persuasive voice," and, of course, "heteroglossia." But there is much more that needs to be said here. Bakhtin is important to discussions about voice because he rejects the notion that language is a unified system. He rejects the notion that there is a single informing comprehensive structure. In other words, Bakhtin--with his own voice-oriented discourse--incites us to dialogize the prevailing assumption (the romantic and naively self-sufficient assumption) that voice is reified, stable, univocal.

In other words, Bakhtin is concerned with voices. And with terms such as "polyvocality" and "heteroglossia" Bakhtin strategically suggests that he does not want to talk about the romantic (isolated) subject, i.e., Authentic Voice. In particular, with terms such as "heteroglossia" Bakhtin suggests that there are other ways of talking about voice.

So what is "heteroglossia"? According to Bakhtin, "heteroglossia" means other discourses, other-ways-of-speaking. If we anatomize this very word "heteroglossia" we find that it is a voice-oriented compound word. "Hetero" connotes "other, different, opposed"; "glossia", a speech act.

Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, then, suggests a diversity of discourses, of utterances, of voices. To be sure, this notion of diversity is immensely important. But how do we make this notion, this process, manifest in composition classrooms? More specifically, how do we incite students to ascertain the evidence? to cash it out? [Insert Sean's paper (page 1)]

This is a paper I received from Sean McEnroe, one of my second semester Freshman English students. This paper emerges from a "popular culture" unit. One of the main goals of this unit was to expose and to exhume how our notion of "self" is culturally constructed. (One assignment, for example, involved creating a collage which visually represented themselves--that is, "self" in relation to popular culture. With this particular collage assignment, I suggested seeing how culture informs our values,

beliefs, ways of seeing and behaving and talking. I did not, however, stress hearing how voices, discourses, can dominant and muffle other voices and can control our creative imaginations.)

If we read the title and the first paragraph we gain a sense of what is going on here. Sean's paper examines the phenomenon of dieting and critiques a society that values quick weight loss. But what strikes one immediately is the title--Just Do It. This is the voice of advertising. To be more specific, this is the voice of Nike. This is also the voice that not only begins, but also ends, Sean's paper. Sean appropriates these three words to authorize his own point of view. These three words are used in such a way that they emerge from the voice of a persona who is, as Sean insists, "one of society's leading health and fitness advocates" (McEnroe 4). (Note that this is not the voice of a manipulator, a persona that uses ambiguous slogans in order to seduce consumers into just buying their products.)

To be sure, Sean's particular accentuation of "Just Do It" suggests an acquiescence with a dominant discourse. But this decision to speak with someone else's words also gestures to other moments in the text in which (other) voices break in on the scene.

In The Dialogic Imagination Bakhtin states that heteroglossia is internally stratified and consists of a cacophony of voices. Here we encounter a range of diverse voices--for example, if we

listen to texts we hear social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (Bakhtin 262-263). With Sean's paper we have already heard one sound bite of such heteroglossia. However, throughout this paper--in particular, with paragraph 5--we can hear a multitude of voices.

For the most part, with the first four paragraphs the voice that speaks is a voice that is distanced and matter of fact. Examples are provided. A focus is established. Research is integrated. And all this is done by a voice that seems to be disciplining that multitude of voices that Bakhtin hears. In short, this voice sounds like what Margaret Himley calls the "English paper voice"--a voice not disjuncted or schizophrenic; rather, a voice that disciplines, silences, suppresses, multiple voices. But with paragraph five the reader is asked to jump a great intonational divide. We move from a seemingly singular voice to:

Ok, I hear you! You don't have time for exercise, and living at school only afford you dorm or fast food. I'll start with time for exercise. What happened yesterday on "Day's", last week on "Beverly Hills 90210", or today on Rocky and Bullwinkle"? If you can answer these questions then I rest my case--you can guess where your time went. If not, then you may

truly be at a loss for time, but take the stairs or wake up early on Saturday and Sunday to go jogging.

Researchers find that simply walking improves the ability to circulate blood to the legs and strengthens the bones. So walk to the mall or work or wherever (McEnroe 2-3).

"Ok, I hear you!"? Why this switch, this twist and turn in the text, this different intonation? Who, I wondered (and still wonder) is your audience? Who is speaking? Is this a different voice?

As noted, the first part of Sean's paper does not seem multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. We have a hard time finding "a diversity of social speech types. . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically arranged" (Bakhtin 262). But here, and with Sean's insistence that we hear, we overhear other tones, other ways of speaking.

A number of things are happening in paragraph 5. First, with this change in tone comes a change in audience. For example, with the reference to "Day's", "Beverly Hills 90210" and to "Rocky and Bullwinkle" we find a speaker appealing to an audience that tunes into popular culture. The reference to "dorms" signals a specific audience: college students. However, with the references to "Day's" to "Beverly Hills 90210" and to "Rocky and Bullwinkle" the implied audience might also be the house husband or house wife, the very young child who enjoys cartoons. Secondly, with a number of

sentences we hear other voices shuttling in here. For example, with the sentence "If you can answer those questions than I rest my case. . ." (2) we hear different voices, different sociolects. We hear, in short, heteroglossia, other ways of speaking. The first part ("If you can answer those questions") sounds like the voice of a questionnaire; the voice of a teacher; even, the voice of a game show host. And with "I rest my case" we hear the voice of a lawyer, a lawyer who is arguing his point in a court of Law.

But there is much more. With "Researchers find that simply walking. . ." we hear, once again, that "English paper voice." (But might this also be a commercial? I can't help but hear "9 out of 10 dentists surveyed said. . . .") And with the imperative "but take the stairs or wake up early on Saturday and Sunday to go jogging" we hear the voice of a doctor prescribing to a patient. We hear the voice of a mother or father talking to a child. We hear a speaker talking with authority. We hear a speaker who talks like, to use Sean's "own words," a "leading health and fitness advocate."

In short, Sean's paper, especially with the imbrication of (other) voices, with his emphasis on hearing, incites us to ask a number of questions concerning the teaching of "voice" in composition classrooms. First, do we want a text that sounds like it emerges from a single voice (that ominous "English paper voice" that Himley speaks of)? Second, do we value these intonational twists and turns? Third, do we want to introduce the word "heteroglossia" in composition classrooms? If so, how do we

introduce this notion of "heteroglossia" in compositions classrooms
without alienating students?

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Sean McEnroe

English 002

Popular Culture Unit

Just Do It

One hundred years ago, the woman with the large hips and body was the ideal catch. In the 1960's, the anorexic body type was all the rage. Now, the craze is to have the muscled, but thin figure of Patrick Swayze or Cher. Today, in the age of quick marts, fast food, and generally faster living, controlling weight in an orderly, slower method almost seems antique. Archaic as it is, a good diet with exercise is the most efficient way to stay not only trim, but also healthy.

In today's society, being physically fit is a goal many Americans desire. We are shown ideal, yet almost unattainable perfect bodies every day. Everyone is affected by the onslaught that the media throws at us in magazines, television, and billboards. The images seen are those of tan, trim, and physically fit people promoting the need for diet products and clothing in order to achieve overall happiness. We receive messages paralleling, "If you look like this you can be happy!"

Consequently, Americans begin to look for the quickest way possible to loose weight. However, they don't realize the ramifications of quick weight loss. How many people have seen "Oprah" lately? She went on a quick weight loss plan and gained all

her weight back just as quickly. That just shows how the body works. Rapid weight loss is not normal and the body cannot accept it. Achieving the perfect body is realistically attainable only for those willing to work for it.

The major concern for many Americans, however, is not achieving the perfect body, but simply acquiring a healthier mode of living for a longer life. Many older people are finally realizing that a healthy body reduces stress and extends lives. Although starting in the later stages of life is better than nothing, maintaining physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle should be a practice begun earlier in life. Healthy living includes more than just not eating until you drop. Both diet and exercise contribute to a healthy life. A good diet is obvious in its advantages towards your health. Exercise alone can increase metabolism, blood circulation, and respiratory strength as well as reduce sickness and stress (McCarthy 148). Considering these benefits, how can you possibly neglect your health?

Ok, I hear you! You don't have time for exercise, and living at school only affords you dorm or fast food. I'll start with time for exercise. What happened yesterday on "Day's", last week on "Beverly Hills 90210", or today on "Rocky and Bullwinkle"? If you can answer these questions then I rest my case--you can guess where your time went. If not, then you may truly be at a loss for time, but take the stairs or wake up early on Saturday and Sunday to go jogging. Researchers find that simply walking improves the ability

to circulate blood to the legs and strengthens leg bones. So walk to the mall or work or wherever.

Now, on to the food situation. Yes, food at the dorms is fatty and conducive to weight gain, but so is that nightly ice cream cone and bag of chips. Cutting those snacks out alone can trim some unwanted calories. Dorm food can be improved easily. Every day there are fruits, vegetables, salads, meat, rice, pasta, potatoes, and fruit juice available. Pasta is the best stuff ever, along with rice and potatoes--pure starch and carbohydrates. You say you don't like vegetables. Top them with cheese--it won't hurt that much. If you're desperately in need of dessert, get some jello or yogurt. Yogurt and a couple of glasses of skim milk alone surpass your protein needs for most any day.

Admittedly, not all media supports quick weight loss, and the craze for fitness is not always healthy. Such advertisements as, "Milk, it does the body good." and "Eat right, Get plenty of sleep, and Drink lots of fluids." which are shown on television and T-shirts convey the correct message for a healthy lifestyle (Dairy Assn. and Nike). Also, many sources of information are biased toward healthy/sexy bodies and avoid some of the dangers of a chronically unhealthy lifestyle. Many times, efforts to maintain a healthy physique lead to serious altercations in lifestyle. Those most likely to be affected are those looking for a "quick fix." The pressure to succeed in diet and exercise overloads both the mind and

body. These problems are easily relieved when one realizes that, as I mentioned before, the road to a truly healthy body has no shortcuts.

No one expects you to be a model, but why give up on a better body which betters your life? While Americans today spend billions of dollars on health clubs for exercise, the market for vitamin supplements and diet foods expands daily to satisfy the growing demand for the healthier life (Brand 66). With all of the possibilities the health world has to offer, there has to be something out there that you can do and eat to improve your health and body without utter pain. If it is a problem of motivation, then follow on of society's leading health and fitness advocates and

-----Just Do It-----